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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6000

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November 15, 2005

TOM HARKIN, IOWA
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The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General of the United States
441 G Street, N.W. Room 7125
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

On December 22, 2003, a cow in Washington State tested positive for Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), prompting USDA to promise to step up the pace of adoption of a National Animal Identification System (NAIS) with the main objectives being animal health and disease control as well as food safety. In April 2005, USDA issued a draft strategic plan outlining the time frame within which the NAIS will be fully operational in the United States.

The development and implementation of the NAIS must be cost effective, fair and least burdensome to producers while encompassing critical animal health, public health and security concerns. Due to the enormous implications that NAIS will have throughout the entire food and animal industry, I ask that GAO examine the following questions. (1) What will be the cost to implement and maintain the NAIS, including the cost burdens to producers and federal and state governments for their respective roles in carrying out the system? (2) How effectively has USDA utilized federal dollars for funding cooperative agreements with states and tribal governments and how evenly has it distributed funds among the several animal species? (3) How effectively will the NAIS protect, or perhaps jeopardize, proprietary information of producers? (4) Who is USDA consulting to derive critical information in developing the animal identification system, and is USDA soliciting and receiving a balanced array of views? (5) Will USDA incorporate principles and practices of existing USDA disease eradication programs or other systems into the structure and operation of the NAIS? (6) Will USDA's plans for the NAIS in any way encourage or contribute to vertical integration or consolidation in the livestock industry?

As you proceed with work on this request, please keep my office advised of your progress. USDA's National Animal Identification System is constantly evolving, so I respectfully ask that you accommodate modifications to this request and your work plan as needed. If you have any questions regarding this request, please contact John Ferrell on my staff at (202) 224-6922. Thank you for your assistance in this matter.

Sincerely yours,



Tom Harkin
Ranking Democratic Member